

Soyinka's Ecological Vision in *A Dance of the Forests*

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Abstract: This paper examines Wole Soyinka's acclaimed play *A Dance of the Forests* from an ecological perspective. Ecocritics study how cultures construct and are in turn constructed by culture. The relationship between man and nature has been an abiding interest of writers and readers alike. Texts are evaluated on the basis of the contribution they make to the environmental debate and the responses they offer to environmental crises. African literature is often found to be deeply committed to combating oppression. African writers take up the laborious tasks of decolonising the psyches of their compatriots and healing the evils perpetuated by colonialism. The concepts of Deep ecology theorised by Arne Naess are employed to delve into the intricate message formulated by the playwright.

Keywords: Ecocriticism, African literature, deep ecology, Arne Naess.

1. INTRODUCTION

Ecocriticism is a broad avenue of enquiry which explores the relationship between literature and environment. Ecocritical studies have focussed variously on how nature is represented in literary texts; what ecological message is contained in the text; how wilderness is created; and the relationship between man and nature. It is presumed that human culture is related to the physical world, each constantly affecting and influencing the other. Literary theory in general attributes the meaning of society to the outer world that man is related to. Ecocriticism on the other hand expands the notion of outer world to mean the entire ecosphere and takes an earth centred approach to literary studies.

Ecocritics generally base their discourse on a "green" moral and political agenda. They seek to bring about a synthesis of environmental and social concerns and to bring to the forefront partially concealed debates regarding environmental issues. Texts are evaluated on the basis of the contribution they make to the environmental debate and the responses they offer to environmental crises.

Environmentalists often espouse radical views and deep ecology is one of the most widespread among them. Deep ecology activists maintain that the well being of human and non-human life have intrinsic value in themselves. The usefulness of the non-human for human purposes is not the only merit they perceive. It does not argue for preservation of resources only for the benefit of humans. Deep ecology advocates a shift from a human centred to a nature centred system of values. It encourages an egalitarian attitude not only towards all members of the ecosphere, but also towards all entities in the ecosphere. The old anthropomorphic attitude is done away with and ecocentrism is encouraged. While British ecocritics focused on Wordsworth, American critics identified Thoreau as a key figure. Later study of works which do not obviously deal with nature began to be practised, which is more complicated and also has the potential to throw up new and unexpected ideas related to the environment.

Ecocriticism eventually broadened to study how cultures construct and in turn are constructed by nature. Ecocriticism is by nature an interdisciplinary affair cutting across environmental history, philosophy, sociology and the life sciences. It occupies a literary space alongside animal studies, postcolonial theory and feminist theory. Colonialism based its exploitative regime on theories of native populations being different, more primitive and in need of a civilizing influence. Accompanying this was a romantic notion that the native people were closer to nature. Similarly the patriarchal world view projects women as more attuned to nature. The natural beings are supposed to be in need of support and guidance

and mentoring. These cultural constructions of identity are opposed by ecocritics who prefer to promote the revelation of being propounded by Heidegger. Responsible humans have an implicit duty to let things disclose themselves in their inimitable way rather than forcing them into meanings and identities that suit their own instrumental values.

Ethical commitment is also implicit in ecocriticism. Maintaining an ethical stand for effecting change is a crucial part of the ecocritical agenda. Michael P. Branch et al explain in the 1998 collection *Reading the Earth*:

Implicit (and often explicit) in much of this new criticism is a call for cultural change. Ecocriticism is not just a means of analyzing nature in literature; it implies a move towards a more biocentric world-view, an extension of ethics, a broadening of humans' conception of global community to include nonhuman life forms and the physical environment. Just as feminist and African American literary criticism call for a change in culture — that is they attempt to move the culture toward a broader world-view by exposing an earlier narrowness of view — so too does ecological literary criticism advocate for cultural change by examining how the narrowness of our culture's assumptions about the natural world has limited our ability to envision an ecologically sustainable human society. (xiii)

Postcolonial ecocriticism challenges the imperialist mode of exploitation of the environment. Plumwood says that ecological imperialism views nature or the animal other as being outside of human needs and permanently in service of it. In the ideology of Colonialialism anthropocentrism and Eurocentrism are inseparable. Anthropocentrism is deeply entrenched and unquestioned in many cultures. The interests of homo sapiens are given absolute prioritisation over the silenced majority and this is accepted as "natural". The privileged human is thus endowed with the licence for exploitation. Postcolonial writers often dwell upon the culture of exploitation and the culture of condoning exploitation as the natural state of affairs.

Deep ecology identifies the humanity/nature dualism as the source of anti-ecological beliefs and practices. Humans are considered to be different from nature and superior to nature because they possess souls or because they have the power of reason. Ecofeminism targets the androcentric dualism of man/woman because it distinguishes men from women based on certain attributes and implies the superiority of men. Both these arguments share a logic of domination. They point to exploitation and oppression on the basis of race, gender, class and species as the root problem of the woes of ecology.

Deep ecology which was first formulated by Arne Naess, a Norwegian philosopher and mountaineer offers a philosophical basis for environmental advocacy which may, in turn, guide human activity against perceived self-destruction. Deep ecology and environmentalism hold that the science of ecology shows that ecosystems can absorb only limited change by humans or other dissonant influences. Further, both hold that the actions of modern civilization threaten global ecological well-being. Ecologists contend that massive human economic activity has pushed the biosphere far from its natural state through reduction of biodiversity, climate change, and other influences. Simply stated the principles of deep ecologists are based on wilderness preservation, population control and simple living or treading lightly on the planet.

The deep ecologists' argument that humans should be considered as part of nature, comes under attack because humans perpetrate acts which can be considered unnatural. The opposing perspective envisages the evolution of human culture or second nature from the external or first nature. As a consequence of this view, environmental problems cannot be considered as separate from problems like poor housing and lack of clean water. The tendency to identify problems like environmental degradation and pollution with poverty is opposed. Short term shallow remedies are discouraged and long term approach involving redesigning our whole systems based on values and methods that truly preserve the ecological and cultural diversity of natural systems.

Wole Soyinka the Nigerian Nobel laureate has consistently written against all forms of oppression irrespective of the colour of the oppressor. He is one of the most imaginative advocates of native culture and the humane social order it embodies. Soyinka grew up in a colonial environment, but his ethnic heritage was Yoruba. The play *A Dance of the Forests* was produced to coincide with Nigeria's official celebration of independence. The play presents a pageant of the chronic dishonesty and abuse of power which colonialism had bred in generations of native politicians. Initially the play was criticised by almost all sections of people. Nigerian authorities were displeased that widespread corruption was insinuated in the play. Leftists disliked the elitist aesthetics of the play. The proponents of Negritude objected because European dramatic techniques were employed in the play. Later the radical originality of his approach came to be appreciated. He wanted to liberate Africa from its crippling legacy of European imperialism. His attempt was to reformulate native myth to accommodate contemporary reality and to open the way to self retrieval.

In *A Dance of the Forests* an unnamed community comes together to celebrate the gathering of the tribes. In preparation for this a carver called Demoke had been commissioned to carve a suitable totem. Demoke, a master carver chooses the Araba tree that is sacred to the deity Eshuoro. Because of his crippling fear of heights, he is unable to carve the top portion of the tall tree. His apprentice Oremole who is also a devotee of Eshuoro volunteers to climb to the head of the tree and do the carving. In a fit of jealous rage Demoke pushes Oremole from the tree to his death, chops down the top of the tree and completes the totem. He then heads to the forest where he meets Rola, the prostitute and Adenebi the council orator. The three are led deep into the forest by Forest Head, the chief deity who poses as Obaneji. Demoke is hotly pursued by the irate Eshuoro who is seeking vengeance. The patron God of carvers Ogun follows hot on the heels of Eshuoro, eager to protect Demoke. The councillors of the town had propitiated the deities and had asked for illustrious ancestors to participate in the celebrations. Instead of the kings and conquerors they had hoped for, Forest Head sends the two victims of avarice and corruption. The dead man is the warrior who refused to fight in the unjust fictitious war of a twelfth century Emperor Mata Kharibu, and was castrated and sold into slavery at the behest of Kharibu's demonic queen Madame Tortoise. The dead woman is his pregnant wife who subsequently commits suicide and still carries in limbo, their unborn child.

Soyinka provides a preamble to the play, a testimony from Aroni, the one-legged one, which gives us a glimpse of the proceedings that follow. The three humans are taken back to a previous existence and we see them commit crimes similar to those they have been responsible for as "living characters". The scene is now set for the dance and a series of rites take place at the end of which Demoke is seemingly sacrificed but is ultimately rescued by Ogun and restored to the human community.

This project attempts to ecocritically analyse the play applying the tenets of deep ecology and bring to the fore the ecological message it carries. Soyinka seeks to bring about a regeneration in society and the role that he assigns to the natural world can be understood through this. The African worldview is examined in the next chapter in order to understand the traditional cultural relationship with nature. The third chapter presents the analysis of the play and the conclusions drawn are conveyed in the fourth and final chapter.

2. THE AFRICAN WORLDVIEW

Africa, the cradle of mankind, is home to many cultures across its varied geographic regions that practice a wealth of spiritual and religious belief systems. The indigenous belief systems have altered, and many traditions have been lost or replaced by the secular and religious traditions of immigrants and colonisers.

To the African wisdom the ultimate reality is the Vital Force. The hierarchy of realities in African thought begin with God as the ultimate explanation of the genesis and sustenance of the Vital Force. Spirits are mediators of the Vital Force between God and man. The spirits are either created by God or made up of the spirits of men who died a long time ago. Next come the human beings who are alive and who are not yet born and then the animals and plants or the remainder of biological life. Phenomena and objects without biological life, even though they do not possess the Vital Force, help to sustain and enhance it. These realities are not strictly compartmentalised. The animate world influences the inanimate and the spirit world influences the human. There are no fixed boundaries. Man is supposed to bring about harmony.

The sense of community is very strong in the African worldview. The African social philosophy can be summed up thus: "I am because we are, and since we are therefore I am".

Indigenous African religious practises were based on oral traditions and on knowledge and customs which are passed on during a wide variety of ceremonies and rituals during rites of passage and a range of community events. Some of the content of these ceremonies and rituals are secret, which combined with an oral rather than written tradition made them especially vulnerable to change over time. Many of the sacred environments which are believed to be the abodes of nature spirits or which are sacred places of learning about traditional healing, divination and rites to connect with the ancestors have been polluted or destroyed by mining, deforestation, dams and commercial cash crops. As a result of all

these influences and impacts, indigenous African belief systems and knowledge are being forgotten. People are giving up many of their traditional ways in favour of western education, capitalist enterprise, new religious practices and prioritizing the individual over their community.

The global environmental crisis, which is particularly harshly expressed in parts of Africa, is resulting in a growing interest in traditional African knowledge systems and of how communities lived in a sustainable relationship with their environment. For Africans, religion focusses on the

preservation of human wellbeing and the promotion of whatever enhances life on Earth. At a practical level, a healthy natural environment is acknowledged as essential for a healthy and harmonious life. The connection is also deeply spiritual. In traditional African societies nature was regarded as a gift by a supreme Creator God for the benefit of humanity who believed that mankind was created at the centre of the universe.

Nature, however, is not a gift to abuse and a host of nature spirits associated with specific animal and tree species and sacred forests, rivers, lakes, and mountains remind local communities of their need to respect the environment and to use it sustainably. Through responsible behaviour people, were required to co-exist peacefully with other people, other living creatures and natural objects and by so doing to ensure a harmonious and sacred web of life. Many rituals, taboos and customs function to remind communities of the need for respect. Traditional Africans focus on life on earth as a member of a community and spiritually they do not draw clear distinctions between the living and the dead. The dead in the form of ancestors remain part of their community and can intercede on behalf of the living to ensure the wellbeing of their family members and clan.

Land ownership is a core value amongst Africans and is also linked to the extended family's link with their ancestors. God gave the land to each community through their ancestors and they in turn have the responsibility to look after it for future generations.

Water as a source of life and spirituality is another core African value. Traditionally water was recognised as both an essential life force and a source of strong spiritual power. Water spirits were believed to live in and protect water sources as well as being the guardians of fertility, morality, and life itself. They can, however, be chased away by disrespectful actions or by social disharmony. Disrespect shown to them was believed to result in drowning, droughts and floods, and if it was so severe that they left, this could result in the degradation of the water bodies or their drying up. Sacred groves were also afforded the same respect.

The coming of the white man and the imposition of his culture and values through education disrupted the harmonious relationship of the Africans with nature. Their customs and beliefs were denigrated as primitive and successive generations were weaned away from them. Under colonial rule Africa's natural resources were exploited to the maximum and even after independence the neo-colonialists continued the same policy.

3. DEEP ECOLOGICAL CONCERNS

A Dance of the Forests is centred around a celebration called gathering of the tribes. The celebration is supposed to inspire pride in the tribes people – pride in their ancestry, their heritage and accomplishments. As preparation for the celebration, the first task undertaken was to carve a totem. A tall tree was selected for the carving and afterwards all the trees around it were cleared facilitating the construction of a motor road right up to the totem. This sacrilege perpetrated on the sacred grove paves the way for the vengeful quest by Eshuoro. It was man's craving for self glorification which paid scant regard to the ancient grove which was razed. Eshuoro seethes with anger when he contemplates the extent of forest that had been torn down for their celebration.

The Councillor, Demoke's father is worried that his son might meet his punishment for the murder that he has committed. The sighting of the two dead people who were clearly accusers heightens his fears. In an attempt to save his son from the consequences of his deeds, he orders the decommissioned passenger lorry "The Chimney of Ereko" to be driven through the forest. The lorry is notorious for the toxic fumes that it emits. In his selfish concern for his son, the Councillor spares no thought for the damage that he inflicts on the denizens of the forests. The air is rendered foul smelling and impure by the petrol fumes. This is just one example of the self serving manner in which the issue of pollution is swept under the carpet in our daily lives, trying to absolve ourselves of the individual responsibility we have towards the fate of the planet. Exploiting the bounties of nature humans are glutted and full of themselves. The benevolent deity Forest Father holds back the other deities from inflicting the punishment that they deserve. Eshuoro rages:

My patience is at an end. Where the humans preserve a little bush behind their homes, it is only because they want somewhere for their garbage. Dead dogs and human excrement are all you'll find in it. The whole forest stinks. Stinks of human obscenities.(41)

At the ceremonial masque inside the forests the spirits of the plant and animal life arrive to condemn the actions of the humans, sometimes to bemoan it and sometimes to gloat about the destruction the humans have reaped. The spirit of the palm inevitably speaks of the palm wine which humans guzzle and get inebriated by. The Spirit of Precious Stones speaks

of the allure of easy wealth for which men have raided the entrails of the earth and no amount of wealth will ever satisfy them. Entire tribes of indigenous people have been wiped out in Africa in order to ease the way for mining operations. Indigenous tribes considered certain areas as sacred and were duty bound to protect them. Colonisers intent on mining the wealthy deposits of those places had no qualms about eliminating those tribes with their superior weaponry. Indigenous people were considered to be part of nature and more akin to animals by the “civilised” people who landed there. This logic justified the bloodshed in their minds. The Spirit wails:

Aah! Blight this eye that threaded

Rocks with light, earth with golden lodes

Traitor to the guardian tribe, turn

Turn to lead! (65)

The Spirit of the Pachyderms accuses the wanton raiders who had unleashed a bloodbath on the peaceful creatures because they wanted to possess their ivory.

The Spirit of the Rivers and the Spirit of the Sun sound warnings: that people will no longer have free use of water for their needs and that people will be burnt by the fierce noon sun if they continue their abusive and irresponsible way of life.

Then come the greatest victims of the anthropomorphic approach. Man think of animals and nature and all resources as being in his ownership to be harnessed and used as suits his pleasure and convenience. When it comes to the animal world, it is man’s habit to project human emotions and attitudes onto them. So it is considered more cruel to harm creatures which seem to be more like men in some attribute or the other. Insects, especially ants are not endowed with any sort of dignity or right to exist according to the popular way of thought. The ant leader castigates humans for carelessly trampling them underfoot. The ants also hold the humans guilty of ploughing through insignificant creatures in the name of progress, sometimes erecting a casual memorial to the carnage they have caused in order to assuage their guilt.

4. CONCLUSION

Naess and Sessions devised an eight point statement or platform for deep ecology. The first of these general principles state that the well-being and flourishing of human and nonhuman life on Earth have value in themselves and that these values are independent of the usefulness of the nonhuman world for human purposes. Appreciating life quality rather than being obsessed with attaining a higher standard of living is advocated.

In postcolonial Africa the legacy of exploitative market forces continues to rule the roost and attempts to modify the colonialist model have not been entirely successful. The colonists had no inclination to promote the indigenous small scale industries and instead concentrated on plundering the land for their selfish desires. Slaves, gold, diamonds, coffee, cocoa, ivory etc were all shipped out in large quantities. After independence, economic growth is seen as a panacea for all ills, but the division of returns is ignored. African countries thus develop elite classes of rich and super rich people. The condition of the vast majority of people has not improved and in many cases, has in fact deteriorated. Africa needs to change its role of being a mere exporter of raw materials. Sadly, what stands in the way of true decolonisation is the dishonesty and abuse of power practised by African politicians.

Soyinka intended this play to be a wakeup call for the Nigerians. He wants them to forsake the tendencies that they had become subject to and to recognize the value of the indigenous systems. At the same time, he doesn’t want them to be blinded by an unquestioning adulation of the past. Throughout the play he uses proverbs and riddles, which were an inherent part of the oral tradition of the past, to communicate his regenerative message.

The regeneration that Soyinka envisages is not limited to the political or social or economic spheres. His message is that none of these spheres can be demarcated and isolated from everything else. Everything is linked to and is impacted upon the world which we inhabit. Everything has its inherent value and cannot be arranged in a hierarchical order. A minor official accepting a bribe for an innocuous favour may not be aware of the snowballing end result of his action. Nonetheless the world has to bear the brunt of such actions. Adenebi is truly shocked to think that anyone could fix the responsibility for the scores of lives extinguished in the passenger lorry dubbed ‘The Incinerator’. He is the one who is most reluctant to acknowledge his guilt. Rola or Madame Tortoise is in the habit of using others for their pleasure and

benefit. The queen unleashes wars on the most trivial of whims. Wars are notorious for the ecological impact they create. Social gatherings and celebrations are ample excuse for humans to commit grave crimes against the natural world because we always prioritise not only our needs but also our wants and desires over the need to maintain harmony in the natural world. The unnamed community, when it decides to celebrate the gathering of the tribes, thinks only about self-aggrandizement. In order to give prominence to the symbol of the celebration, they wantonly raze grand, old trees to the ground.

Naess views humans as an integral part of a total field-image. He uses the term ecosophy to refer to wisdom with regard to nature. The concept which is the foundation of the deep ecology movement is defined thus:

By an ecosophy I mean a philosophy of ecological harmony or equilibrium. A philosophy as a kind of sofia (or) wisdom, is openly normative. It contains both norms, rules, postulates, value priority announcements and hypotheses concerning the state of affairs in our universe. Wisdom is policy wisdom, prescription, not only scientific description and prediction. The details of an ecosophy will show many variations due to significant differences concerning not only the “facts” of pollution, resources, population, etc. but also value priorities.

(Drengson and Inoue 8)

Soyinka fosters this ecological wisdom through his play *A Dance of the Forests*. He attempts to make his audience understand that thoughtless exploitation of natural resources will have repercussions. In the play the half-child represents the unborn future. It is crucial that we have to take responsibility for the future. The unborn child is the pawn that Eshuoro uses to taunt Demoke with. The desperation, with which Demoke tries to prevent the half-child from being impaled, convinces us that he is ready to abandon his egoistic and destructive self and to be accountable for his actions.

The play envisages a regeneration that will encompass the ecology as well as the economic and social and political. The self is not to be considered separate from nature, but as part of it. Only through such a change in perception can we reverse the ecological destruction that we have perpetrated. The move advocated is towards the ecological self which Naess propounded to practise a “biocentric egalitarianism” in which each natural entity is held as being inherently equal to every other entity.

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